

FEBRUARY 7, 1980

The first I knew of the story, a veterinarian and another guy were talking at a meeting in San Angelo. In great detail, the good doctor was explaining to this town guy about a case of screwworms he was treating in a dog. He wasn't talking about 20 years ago when the pestilence was so fierce. He was talking about that very working day in San Angelo, Texas in the middle of January.

You have to realize too that the doctor had plenty of savvy in his field. His practice reached back to the days when Shortgrass sheep and cow doctors saw as much malnutrition in their colleagues as they did in their patients.

When he graduated from vet school, human doctors were lucky to get four-bits actual cash down on major surgery. I'm speaking of the glorious '30s in case you are puzzled. In those awful times, veterinarians used their time researching such scientific topics as paying their office rent and keeping the grocery store from seizing their medicine bags.

On the way back to Mertz on that night, I worked and reworked the facts. Less than two days before, the Screwworm Center at Mission had released a report that their sterile fly program was becoming effective way down into Mexico as far as the Canal Zone. Screwworms, I knew from long experience, rarely ever hatch in January in our country.

The doctor had nothing to gain by spreading the story. He might turn a profit by dramatizing dog distemper or a flashing rabies tale around, but he couldn't score on screwworms as the Shortgrass Country is covered in experts in that field of medicine.

The following day I returned to San Angelo on business. My last stop was at a large veterinary supply house. The place is old and well respected in the trade. In other times, it did a thriving business mixing fly repellants and smears. Most of the employees have had actual range experience and are quite useful hombres at recommending the various sprays and powders they so eagerly sell to their customers.

While I was picking up my order, I mentioned to the head warehouseman that a dog had turned up with screwworms. I noticed at the time, or I think I did, that he showed little interest in the subject and no surprise. But I had a backlog of other tales to spin and I dropped the dog in deference to a rerun of the Super Bowl and a short recap of the November steer roping.

Several days passed before I thought of the matter again. The weather became so cold that we had plenty of troubles of our own without thinking of a wormy dog.

The weather, in fact, was the reason for breaking the case. Each morning, I began to report colder readings than anywhere except Amarillo. My calls were running 15 to 20 degrees lower than any station close by.

This went on for three or four mornings until I happened to notice that my new indoor thermometer was a Christmas gift from a home insulation company in San Angelo. I don't believe the coffee pot had time to perk before the whole thing was linked together.

Kennedy, bridge, and island. Carter, peanuts, and Georgia bank. Worms, dogs, and medicine house. How simple it was, yet how sly.

I had hoped to have the case wrapped up for you by press time. However, I fear we'll never find the dog owner to testify. Dog owners, you know, become shy and

evasive upon questioning. As with people who have lots of kids, you have to be a cagy investigator to trace the owners or the parents in a crime.

After about 14 dug-up flower beds mixed in with 65 chewed up newspapers, a kennel owner has a mighty poor memory about his dogs. I can remember when we had seven sons roaming the town site of Mertzon; I had a terrible time recognizing my kids, and it worked part of the time.

My next move is to check the passenger lists at the airlines. I don't know when I'll learn to watch that San Angelo gang. To think they'd pull such a trick is hard to believe, but you are not going to convince me that a dog walked all the way from the Panama Canal even if the flies were bothering him.